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AUTHOR Gillis, M. K.; Olson, Mary W.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the differences in the essay exam scores of college students who did no planning, some planning, or extensive planning before writing answers to questions on essay exams. Subjects, 100 undergraduate education students enrolled in reading methods classes and 37 graduate reading students enrolled in a psychology of reading class, took part in regularly scheduled exams. Directions for the essay part suggested that they plan before writing their answers. The exams were graded and the amount of planning each student did was classified. An Analysis of Variance and follow-up Scheffe were conducted to see if there were differences in the scores achieved by students doing no, some, and extensive planning. Results indicated that students who did some planning scored better than students who did no planning, and students who did extensive planning scored better than students who did no or some planing. A follow-up study is being conducted to see if requiring planning on a second test will improve the scores of those who did no planning on the first test. (Two tables of data are included.) (Author/MG)

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Do College Students who Plan Before Writing Score Better on Essay Exams?

M. K. Gillis

Southwest Texas State University

Mary W. Olson

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Running head: PLANNING FOR ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

One hundred undergraduate education students enrolled in reading methods classes and 37 graduate reading students enrolled in a psychology of reading class took regularly scheduled exams. Directions for the essay part suggested that they plan before writing their answers. The exams were graded and the amount of planning each student did classified. An ANOVA and follow up Scheffe were conducted to see if there were differences in the scores achieved by students doing no, some, and extensive planning. Results indicated that students who did some planning scored better than students who did no planning, and students who did extensive planning scored better than students who did no or some planning. A follow up study is being conducted to see if requiring planning on a second test will improve the scores of those who did no planning on the first test

Do College Students who Plan Before Writing Score Better on Essay Exams?

Because we are aware of the nature of the writing process, know that better high school and college writers do more planning and revising than poorer writers at these levels (Perl, 1979, Sommers, 1980), and know that college learning centers and college reading improvement texts (e.g., McWhorter, 1989; Wiener & Bazerman, 1988) suggest that students plan before answering essay questions, we have always informally encouraged our students to take some time to plan their answers before they begin writing in response to essay questions. We have observed that students whose bluebooks show evidence of their doing some planning before they write earn higher grades on their essays than students whose bluebooks show no such evidence

The purpose of this study was to find out if our observations were accurate. Are there differences in the essay exam scores of college students who do no, some, and/or extensive planning before writing answers to questions on essay exams?

Subjects

Subjects were 137 students, 12 male and 125 female, from 2 universities. One hundred were undergraduates, 41 seniors and 59 sophomores, majoring in elementary education enrolled in five sections of three reading methods classes. Thirty-seven were graduates seeking a master's degree in reading enrolled in two sections of a psychology of reading course. Two of the classes were taught by the investigators; one was taught by a colleague.

Procedures

Instructors in these courses regularly give exams that are at least part essay. The exams used in this study were regularly scheduled exams prepared by the instructors in their

usual way with the exception that the directions for the essay questions included the statement, "You are encouraged to use a page or two in your bluebook before each answer for brainstorming ideas and outlining your answer. You have the time and space. My experience is that your answers will be better if you do this than if you launch into them with no planning." No special attention was given to this direction when the exams were given out and students of the two investigators are used to seeing similar directions on exams. Students answered one, three, or five essay questions.

Instructors administered the exams to their own classes, graded the completed exams, and calculated the total percentage of possible points earned. The investigators then classified the amount of planning for each essay as follows: none = no evidence of planning; some = a few notes, a list, etc.; and extensive = notes or list plus outline or map, or arrows connecting ideas, or numbers to indicate order for organization, etc. An overall classification was then assigned to each student's planning. Most students did the same amount of planning for all questions; nine did not. Seven of these students did the same amount of planning for the majority of their answers, so their planning was classified as whatever they did for the majority of the questions. Data from two students who did not do the same amount of planning for the majority of questions was not used in the analysis. Second raters classified 10% of the plans independently. Their classifications agreed with the investigators' classifications 100% of the time.

Results

An analysis of variance (See Table 1) showed that there were significant differences ($p < .0001$) in the percentage of possible points earned by students who did various amounts of planning. A follow up Scheffe indicated that there were significant differences ($p < .001$) between groups doing no planning and some planning, no planning and extensive planning, and some planning and extensive planning. The number of students doing various amounts of

planning as well as means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 About Here

Discussion

Do college students who plan before writing answers to essay questions score better than those who don't? These data indicate that the answer to that question is, "Yes," and that those who plan the most score the best. Our observations were affirmed by the data, so we now have other questions to answer. The first is, does planning improve scores on essay exams? We don't know. Planning before writing answers on an essay exam is using a metacognitive strategy. The students who participated in this study were free to plan or not to plan before they wrote their answers. There is some evidence (e.g., Collins, Brown, Morgan, & Brewer, 1977) that students who spontaneously use metacognitive strategies use them appropriately, while students who do not use these strategies spontaneously, when required to do so, do not execute them correctly.

To see if planning improves scores on essay exams, we are conducting a second study. Most of the students who participated in this study will soon be taking a final exam. They have been told the results of the first study. The directions for their finals will contain more detailed directions for planning and indicate that some points for each answer will be awarded for planning. If this question is answered, "Yes," there will be clear instructional implications. If it is answered, "No," we will have other questions to answer before we can discuss instructional implications.

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Table 1

Analysis of Variance for Percentage Scores by Amount of Planning

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Between Groups	2	10841.975	5420.987	26.421	.0001
Within Groups	132	27083.458	205.178		
Total	134	37925.433			

Table 2

Mean Percentage Scores and Standard Deviations by Group

Group	Score	SD
No Planning (n = 37)	72.7	3.57
Some Planning (n = 62)	82.5	1.54
Extensive Planning (n = 36)	96.91	.94